

Sermon: "I Once Was Blind But Now ..."
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

ANGELS

William Willimon tells a story about a friend who taught at Duke Seminary before returning to the ministry. When he came back to his old school for a visit, he told Willimon about a very unusual experience.

It seems that the furnace at the parsonage had malfunctioned. The pastor had someone out to check it, but you know how that goes. When the repairman comes, the thing you think is broken performs without a flaw, making you look very foolish.

Well, that's what happened this day.
But, things were not as good as they appeared.

One Saturday in January his friend awoke early and tried to get out bed. But, for some strange reason he couldn't get fully awake. He thought that maybe he was just tired from the day before so he went back to sleep.

He awoke later and looked at the alarm clock. It was almost noon, and there was a sermon to finish! So, he struggled to get out of bed. But, again he couldn't do it. His head was throbbing, and he couldn't move.

So, once again he fell back into bed. That's when it happened. He saw a little girl dressed in white. He asked,
"How did you get in here? What are you doing in my house?"

The little girl pointed toward the door and said,
"You must get up and get out, or you will never get out."

At her urging he struggled to get out of bed, and crawled out of the house. The child disappeared, and he collapsed on the front porch. The neighbors saw him lying on the front porch. An ambulance was called and then some experts came to check out the house.

It was filled with carbon monoxide.

This sophisticated pastor and theologian was not given to flights of fancy. But, he explained his experience in this way, "I think that 'child' in my room was some sort of angel. I think God sent her to warn me."

Willimon was a bit skeptical. He knew, of course, that hallucinations are possible when we are exposed to that much carbon monoxide. Funny, we religious leaders believe that God was in Christ, but we get really uncomfortable when someone today starts talking about angels and miracles.

So, Willimon told his friend that he should be careful to whom he told this story. After all, he might want to come back to the seminary one day!

But, his friend did not seem to take the warning to heart. He replied,

"All I know is, a few minutes more, and I would have been dead."

A MIRACLE TOO BIG

That story sort of reminds me of another story, the one we read today from the gospel of John. There was a man who was blind from birth. And Jesus healed him. He covered his eyes with spit and dust, and told him to wash that mixture off in the pool of Siloam. The man did as he was told, and wonder of wonders he could see for the first time in his life!

There was no way to explain this miracle away. Ancient healers might have been able to help someone with vision problems, but heal a man who was born blind? Never.

So, for many, this was just too big a miracle. There must be some other explanation. Perhaps this man just looked like the fellow who was blind from birth. It's not a miracle at all, just a case of mistaken identity. The blind man himself stopped that rumor.

He said, "I am that blind man whom you passed by every day as I begged for a living."

RELIGIOUS UMPIRES

As a result, the religious experts, the Pharisees got involved in the process, and they were determined get to the bottom of this story. Do you remember that old joke about the baseball umpire who said, "There are balls and there are strikes, but they aren't anything until I call them."

Well, the Pharisees were the umpires of the religious world. It wouldn't be a certified "miracle" until they called it. And they were not inclined to give Jesus a favorable call.

They interviewed the man and asked him to tell his story again. He told how it happened, how he had been healed on the Sabbath, and immediately there was a problem.

He did this on the Sabbath? Doesn't this man know that you can't do that? It's not according to the Book of Church Order! It wasn't done "decently and in order!" Surely this can't be a valid miracle.

I've sat on those committees that judge whether a person is qualified to be ordained as a pastor in the church. The requirements are stringent. Folks need a college degree and a seminary degree. They need to pass the ordination exams and are evaluated by the Committee on Ministry.

Most of our candidates are willing to jump through the hoops, but occasionally we get someone who doesn't meet our expectations. They're not the traditional Presbyterian types. They come from the wrong side of the tracks, and they don't believe in a God who does things decently and in order.

They believe in a God who heals the sick and challenges the powerful. They believe in a God who turns a person upside down and inside out. To hear this person talk, you would think that God personally told them what to do every day of their life.

We religious leaders are not so pleased when we get a person like that. We ask them if they had ever considered becoming a Baptist, or Methodist or anything but Presbyterian.

It's not that we don't want them in the church. It's just that we understand that people like this don't want to follow the rules, and we are Presbyterians. We follow the rules. We see ourselves as gatekeepers for the church. We can't just let anyone into the ministry, especially someone whose experience of faith is a bit too spectacular.

Of course, there are good reasons for our suspicion. I know from hard experience that we sometimes we fool others and ourselves with all our religious talk. Quite often there is some personal problem that is being disguised by all this talk of healing and faith. Like the disciples of Jesus and the Pharisees, we want to know about the sin that lies behind the problem.

We have a cure for these overenthusiastic prophets. We send them to seminary! There's nothing like a few years of Greek and Hebrew to take the fire out of a person!

A FAITH THAT ENDURES TESTING

But, amazingly enough, there are some who still retain that fire, that sense of God's personal intervention and healing in their life despite our best efforts to put a wet blanket on their dramatic story.

Oh, they learn more. They come back to us with a greater appreciation for the church and the Bible. But, they still look back on that personal experience of healing as a guiding beacon of hope in their life.

Some people have a faith experience so strong that they can't help but testify about it all their lives. And they are forever getting into trouble because those of us who haven't had such a dramatic experience are skeptical.

So it was for the man healed by Jesus. The authorities wouldn't leave him alone. They called in his parents and asked them, "Is this your son?" "Yes." "And he was born blind?" "Yes."

I can imagine the religious authorities saying, "How do you think we got these long robes? These are academic robes. We're educated people. We know that healings don't happen on the Sabbath. It's against the rules. So, tell me, what's the real story here?"

But, the parents, afraid that they might get kicked out of the synagogue for unorthodox beliefs, quickly pass the buck. They say, "Listen. This is our son. He was born blind. We don't know who healed him. If you want to know the answer to this mystery, you'll have to ask him. He's old enough to answer for himself."

And so the authorities drag the man born blind back into their interrogation room and say, "Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner."

The man who was born blind replies,

"I don't know much theology. I've never been to seminary like you guys so I'm not sure about sin and sanctification and salvation and stuff like that.

But, one thing I do know. I was blind, but now I see. Today, for the first time in my life, I saw flowers growing in that field. I just can't get over something so beautiful."

The Pharisees are really getting upset at this point. They're not interested in abstract concepts like beauty. They're more like Joe Friday from the popular old TV program, "Dragnet". Many of us remember how he would deadpan his line every week, "just the facts mam."

Well, that was the Pharisees. All they wanted was the facts. They didn't want a lot of emotional hoopla about how this man's personal life had changed. They believed their agenda was much bigger and much more important than what happened to one man.

And so like the police detectives on TV, they start asking the same questions over again, hoping perhaps to find an inconsistency in the man's story. But, the blind man is having none of it. He asks,

"So what's with the third degree? I've already told you what happened." (And then a thought occurs to the man; maybe they want to become his disciples.) So, he says it out loud, "Do you want to become his disciples?"

Wrong question. Now the religious leaders are really in frenzy. They accuse the man of heresy and throw him out of the synagogue.

He has no clue why, and on the way out he is heard to say,

"I didn't even want to talk about theology.
All I know is that once I was blind and now ..."

THE THREAT OF THE MIRACULOUS

This is a story that the modern world desperately needs to hear. We think that we're so smart, so open to facing the facts and going where the evidence takes us. But, I have come to believe that this is not true. Quite often we make the evidence suit what we already believe.

And what happens when there is evidence to the contrary? What happens when something comes into our life that doesn't fit with our neat little view of what can and can't be? We reject the evidence. We say that this can't be. We keep asking questions in an effort to deny the obvious.

A pastor tells of a church member who endured a terrible surgery. It was painful, disfiguring and her recovery took years. But, through this terrible struggle her faith deepened. She found a whole new life for herself, a new sense of dignity and mission. Some said that her recovery was nothing short of a miracle.

In fact, that's what she called it, a miracle.
"God gave me the hope and strength to go on," she said.

But, her sophisticated friends were not so comfortable with that word miracle. One replied, "You have always been a strong person." Another said, "I don't know anyone who has a stronger sense of self than you."

The pastor wanted to scream, "Don't you hear what she is saying. It wasn't her. It was God. It's a miracle." Isn't it interesting how when someone says something like, "God gave me the hope and strength to go on" that some people still regard it as a threat?

A miracle by nature is something that is not expected. A miracle never plays by the rules. A miracle requires us to be open to something or someone above and beyond us. And strangely enough, we religious experts are sometimes the last to recognize and accept it. We tend to overanalyze everything.

But, miracles are not about analysis. Miracles are not another chance for intellectual word games. Miracles are not another chance to say, "Now, let's see. How can we explain this away?" Miracles are about saying, "Wow, or praise God, or halleluiaah." Miracles are about celebrating.

This man was blind but now he can see.
Isn't that a reason to have a party instead of an inquest?

An undergraduate was complaining about her school's religion department. She said, "There are four professors in that department who have taught all kinds of courses in religion, everything from Hindu beliefs to Christian history.

They know a great deal about religion. But, none of them practice any particular faith. That's weird. They know everything about God except God."

MIRACLES TODAY

Don't misunderstand. There are reasons to be skeptical about some miracles. I'm especially skeptical about those who make a big name for themselves selling miracles and works of faith. But, we shouldn't let that keep us from seeing the miraculous in our own lives.

Just this past week at a Presbytery meeting our leader said, "We can take my friend off the prayer list. His cancer is gone. The doctors don't understand why. I think it's a miracle." And we had a prayer of thanksgiving and joy. At that same meeting someone also reported, "One of our ministers has decided to discontinue his chemotherapy. He has now come to accept the inevitable."

And in our grief we interceded for our stricken brother.

And yet both prayers were heartfelt and full of hope. The men and women on that committee knew the truth about miracles.

They don't always come as we expect, and sometimes they don't come at all, at least as we would like them to come.

But, they do come. They come as a sign of greater kingdom, a heavenly kingdom, a place where every illness is cured and every tear is wiped away.

That's what the religious leaders of Jesus' day needed to see, and that's what we need to see as well.

Being blind from birth is a terrible thing, but it is a much worse thing to be blind to the truth about God's presence and power in Jesus Christ.

No amount of Bible study or education can cure the heart that does not seek the power and presence of Almighty God as revealed in God's Son, Jesus.

BLIND BUT NOW HE SEES

Brennan Manning tells the story of a recent convert to Jesus who was approached by an unbelieving friend.

"So, you have converted to Christ?"

"Yes."

"Then you must know a great deal about him. Tell me, what country was he born in?"

"I don't know."

"What was his age when he died?"

"I don't know."

"You certainly know very little for a man who claims to be a convert to Christ."

"You're right. I am ashamed at how little I know about him. But, this much I know: Three years ago I was a drunkard. My family was falling to pieces; they dreaded the sight of me.

But, now I have given up drinking. We are out of debt. Ours is a happy home. My children eagerly await my return home each evening. All this Christ has done for me. This much I know of Christ!"

Jesus can still make the blind see. He can transform the lives of those who are without hope. But, some of us are reluctant to hear the story. We are afraid that meeting this powerful Jesus might mean changing something about our way of life, and we don't want to do that. We prefer our darkness to the light.

And that's why we take the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It reminds us that there is more to our life than just one thing after another. There is grace. There is the power of one who offers himself on the cross as a sacrifice for our sins.

He offers a way out of the darkness.
We who are blind can be changed forever.

Amen.

FIRST PREBYTERIAN